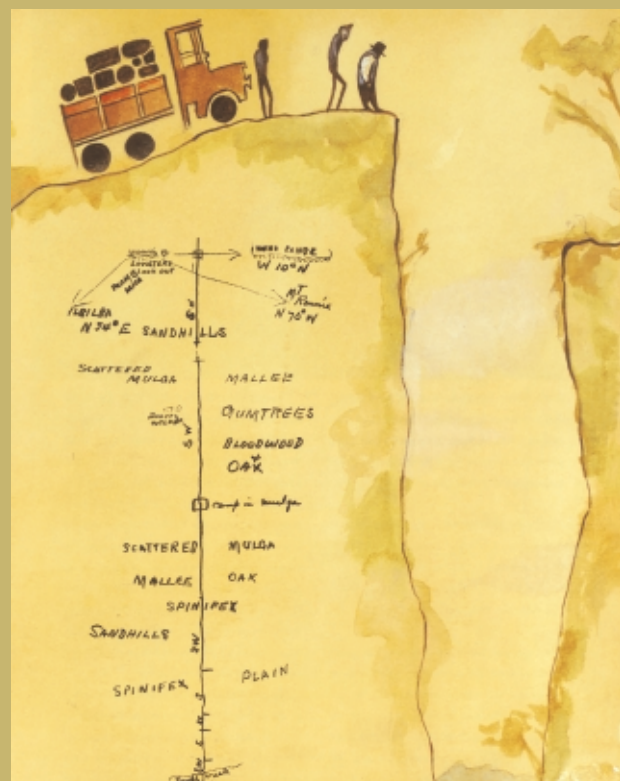




LASSETER

the man, the legend, the gold



Children's author Kathryn England was sitting in her lounge room, when, 'like a bolt out of the blue' the words 'Lasseter's Reef' came into her mind. Immediately she knew she had found the subject of her next book and her writer's block seemed to be over

There after she became 'pretty obsessive' about the enigmatic Lewis Harold Bell Lasseter and all the questions about him that have remained unanswered for over 70 years: 'was Lasseter's story about a fabulous gold reef in Central Australia the truth or an illusion? Why did many sensible men continue to seek out Lasseter's Reef after the first expedition in 1930? Does a vast, rich gold seam still lie hidden in the Australian desert today?'

Seeking answers to these questions set Kathryn England on a research path that involved Lasseter's own diary (held by the Mitchell Library), an interview with one of his children, earlier books by equally obsessed authors, and archives offices in Perth, Darwin, Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. England's book presents 'the facts in Lasseter's defence as well as evidence against him, including previously unpublished material'. England found the new material in State Records' Western Sydney reading room.

Lasseter's story includes so many unknown and unknowable elements that it has the qualities of myth or legend. So, any new evidence, no matter how everyday or functional, further fuels the legend, even as it confirms aspects of the story's authenticity. Research is 'like watching grass grow for some people', says England, but when archivist Gail Davis found three records related to Lasseter in the State archives, 'Fair dinkum, I had to look over my shoulder' she says, describing the sense of excitement and intrigue she felt about her find.

The records included a certificate of incorporation and memorandum of association for the Central Australian Gold Exploration Company Limited — the company set up in 1930 to finance an expedition to investigate Lasseter's claims that he had found a gold reef west of Alice Springs, 30 years before.

The records also include an agreement that Lasseter 'was to be paid a one-tenth share of gold if samples indicated three ounces of gold to the ton. As England explains, although 'he had always been careful not to let anyone know the reef's exact position, he was obliged by the agreement to reveal his landmarks when the expedition reached a point 50 miles (80 kilometres) west of Alice Springs.' Until Kathryn England found this evidence at State Records, the terms and conditions of Lasseter's 1930 agreement with the company were not known.

But the book aims to do more than contribute to the collective knowledge of Lasseter within the research

community. *Lasseter, the Man, the Legend, the Gold* is also 'targeting boys and reluctant readers'. England gives the example of her own 13-year old son who is 'off riding his bike, rather than reading'. On the other hand, her granddaughter, aged eight, has read her other books and likes them all.

Lasseter, the Man, the Legend, the Gold conveys the allure of gold, the drama of the Australian landscape and the tragedy of Lasseter's failed expedition, through a compelling narrative and lively illustrations. Throughout the book, England foregrounds the myriad records she has encountered in her research. They help piece together the story of Lasseter's dreams, schemes and obsessions, which drove other men to distraction and culminated in his own lonely death by starvation in the desert. 'What good a reef worth millions I would give it all for a loaf of bread ...', he laments in his diary.

As for the question: 'was Lasseter's story the truth or an illusion?', Kathryn England has no final conclusion. But she keeps the possibility alive and honours the role of Aboriginal people in Lasseter's story by including the following quote by Billy Marshall-Stoneking from his book *Lasseter in Quest of Gold* as her final entry:

'There is ... a story that Shorty Lungkarta tells. He is an old Pintupi man who, even though he is approaching 70, is quite strong and clear-eyed. Shorty remembers the time [Harold's son] Bob Lasseter came to Papunya in the late 1970s. At that time several of the old men got together to decide whether or not they would show Bob Lasseter the reef. 'We wanted to show him the reef,' Shorty recalls, 'because it was his father's dreaming. But first of all we wanted to know if he wanted to see it because it was his father's dreaming or because he was just a greedy bugger. We talked a lot about that, and when we finished up we decided we better leave it alone. We couldn't show him that reef, poor bugger.'

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